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The Murdoch Law Library: A Short History

By Anne Greenshields, Law Liaison Librarian

Murdoch University Law Library was opened in 1990. It was the natural outcome of the University's decision to establish a Law School. From its inception the Chancellor (Sir Ronald Wilson), the University Librarian (Mr V. Nadasabapathy (Nada)), and the Foundation Professor of Law (Ralph Simmonds), were committed to two principles. First, that the Law Library would be an integral part of the University Library and not a separate library within the Law School. Second, that it would be a high quality research law library serving a quality research law school. This high standard was expressed by them in the typically understated aim of it becoming "a good law library."

At the time most Australian Law Schools had separate law library buildings. This was a specific recommendation made by Dennis Pearce in the 1987 Report *Australian Law Schools: A Discipline Assessment for the Commonwealth Tertiary Commission*. The recommendation reflected the very real tensions that can exist between the highly specialised needs of a law library and a generalised collection. However, this went against the interdisciplinary approach integral to the philosophy of Murdoch University. The decision was made to house the Law Library within the main Library whilst recognising the problems inherent in such integration. Both Nada and Ralph Simmonds determined that the Law Library would function as a separate and discrete library within the main building, rather than being completely integrated into the library's main collection.

The second aim – that of producing a "good law library" – required two distinct provisions: to acquire an appropriate collection, and to implement an employment programme to provide the required staff to service the Law School.

In 1989, Rob Brian, the then Law Librarian at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) was appointed to identify the key collections and resources that were required to produce a good quality research law library. However, such a library does not come without enormous initial expenditure. The costing associated with Brian's recommendations was beyond the sum of money committed by Murdoch University and the Commonwealth in 1989 for the establishment of a Law School. If the aim of achieving a 'good' library was to be achieved, additional finance had to be found.

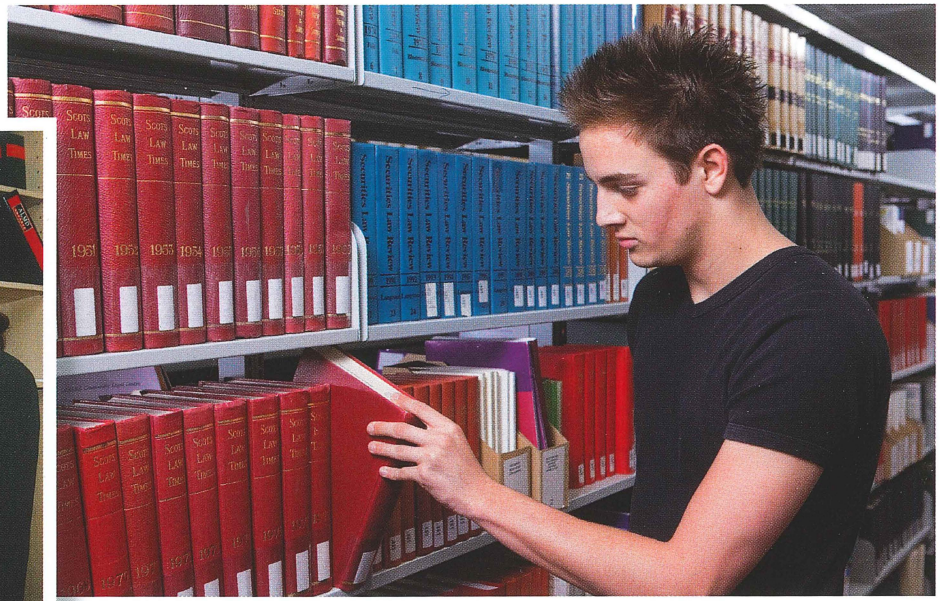
In October 1989 Professor Ralph Simmonds and Sir Ronald Wilson launched the Law Library Campaign. The legal profession in Western Australia responded very generously. By June 1990 the amount of \$1.8 million was raised, far exceeding expectations. This satisfied the amount required to begin to resource the Law Library and to establish a Law Library Trust Fund which continues to provide ongoing financial support.

The second condition, that of an Employment Policy capable of achieving the level of services required, has evolved over time. The first Law Librarian was Deborah Taylor (1989-1993) who, with the assistance of other University library staff, was responsible for the initial stages of the Library's development. Deborah left the Library in 1993 and her role was taken over by Jean Kotai (1993-2002). Jean was an internal appointment who had also been instrumental in the Law Library's development. In 2002 the function and role of the Law Librarian was redefined to that of Law Liaison Librarian and I was appointed. In addition, the Law Library owes much to support given by other serving librarians throughout the University library and by innumerable students, too many to name individually, but to whom the Law School is indebted and grateful.

Achieving an adequate staffing level is an endemic problem for all libraries. It is particularly so in the area of law in which the need to maintain legal currency is a high priority. The minutiae of law do not make this a simple task. With the law in a constant state of flux over a wide area of human and business activity, keeping up with the constant updating of statute and common law changes requires specialist expertise. Such minutiae must be accessible at all times if the high standard identified is to be met by the University. This standard has been achieved by the excellent service provision of library technicians, who have kept the primary legal materials in order and have provided support services within the Law Library. In addition the Murdoch Law Library instituted, in 1992, a process by which its students were mobilised to assist in these often monotonous but essential tasks.

Since 1990 law librarians have provided a Law Reference Service. The traditional means of achieving this is by staffing a Reference Desk with qualified law librarians to meet daily enquiries. Librarians employed in the Murdoch Law Library for longer than 12 months are: Jean Kotai (now McKay) (1993-2002), Deborah Taylor (1989-1993), Sue Freeth (1990-1992), Susan McKay (1991-1995), Anne Greenshields (1992 to present), Helen Bronleigh (1993-2000), Marilyn Boyle (1995-1998), Nerida Gilbert (2002), Anne Young (2002-2003), Ian Lee (2003-2007), Monica Smith (2009 to present) and Bernadette Gargan (2010 to present). The staffing of a Reference Desk has increasingly become difficult to maintain for a number of reasons. It is expensive and a time consuming utilisation of key qualified staff.





This combined with staff cutbacks; increased workloads; and increasing student numbers has made the provision of such a quality service difficult to maintain on a full-time basis. Yet the service is, and remains, vital to a library's *raison d'être*. A number of initiatives have been utilised to meet this problem.

First, the Law School recognised a prime factor in "educating" legal professionals was the development of student attitudes and skills to produce lawyers capable of self-motivated inquiry and research. It was deemed that it was not enough to simply hold legal information but rather that the students needed to be able to access, research and utilise the information held. To achieve this, the Law Library and Law School instituted a programme of reader education in addition to its normal curriculum. As a result, assessable research skills were included within the introductory units "Australian Legal System" and "Legal Research and Writing" reflecting the high priority the Law School placed on their students' ability to undertake legal research.

Second, whilst the law librarians have provided law reference services and reader education directly to the School's law students since 2000, senior law students have been employed, during core teaching periods, to provide basic legal research assistance and support for the research skills training programme. By increasing student participation and emphasising student research techniques and skills the law school has been able to improve its service to the students while simultaneously allowing for a shift in emphasis from a staff-orientated library reference service to a combination of staff and students.

Such an approach has required a close and interactive liaison between the Murdoch South Street Campus Library, the Law Library and the Law School. This liaison resulted in the redefinition of the role of the law librarian who, in essence, became a law liaison librarian.

In addition to these initiatives the Law Library has sought to resolve perennial staff and student number problems by:

- maximum utilisation of centralised University library services such as loans, inter-library loans, purchasing, cataloguing and serials management; and
- a greater reliance on technology in the form of extensive online training and service provision.

Another major and endemic problem for libraries is space. There is never enough and its use is always at a premium. Consequently, libraries are constantly required to restructure to meet changing conditions and needs. The Law Library is no exception and has had three structural changes since its inception.

The first Law Library opened in 1990 and occupied the entire 700 square metres of the "new" extension. By 1993 the University Library had outgrown the capacity of the current building and a new four floor wing to the south of the library was constructed with two floors amounting to 2400 square metres allocated to the Law Library. This allowed for a growth in the collection, a dedicated law reference desk, additional student seating and study areas; and new seminar rooms with the potential for new educational opportunities such as the new electronic Parker & Parker Electronic Reference Room which provides access to digital resources. Other facilities included the microform room with reader/printers, a meeting and staff seminar room, discussion rooms and the law librarians' offices.

The inclusion of a library seminar room, the Minter Ellison Northmore Hale Room, also enabled the Law Library to house the special and vulnerable rare books in an appropriate location which was both accessible and protected. This "special collection" includes Robert Holmes à Court's collection of law books which was initially loaned and later donated to the Library by Janet Holmes à Court. This collection provides a unique insight into a lawyer's office collection in the 1970s as well as a great research resource with many rare and out of print books. Together with other rare, valuable and extremely old materials, this collection emphasises the changing nature of the practice of law and legal materials.

In 2007 the Law Library had to be reconfigured to fit onto one floor of the Library Building. As an outcome of this, the space available to house the Law Library was considerably reduced. This reconfiguration was necessary to facilitate the opening of a 24/7 learning common, computer laboratory and study hall, for all students within the library. The Law Library had no choice but to reduce its physical collection, particularly where duplicate material was available online. Fortunately, many of the losses in the traditional collections and formats have been compensated for by greater space use via compactus shelving, and the new and emerging technologies, particularly the computer. No history of a library would be adequate without some reference to the huge effect electronic technology has had and is continuing to have. Dramatic improvements in the quality and content of online databases ensured that the library policy of discarding duplicate series in print could be realised without impacting the quality of the collection or compromising student outcomes.

It is clear, though not always apparent, that the Law Library is metamorphosing from the static world of formalised print to the more dynamic and interactive digital world. This is characterised today by the use of computers but what shape and form this will take in the future is yet to be determined. Already the Law Library is in the forefront of providing online training to its students and this is one of its growing functions. For Murdoch Law Library staff this is just one more dramatic change in the library's history.

Libraries are perceived to have a static image, but in reality they are constantly responding to external changes. Throughout past transformations the Law Library has always enjoyed the support of the Law Deans and the University Librarians in meeting such challenges. In addition, the Law Library owes a great debt to the ongoing support of the Law Society of Western Australia's Public Purposes Trust Fund. This, and other external funding sources, has ensured the collection has grown to meet the challenges implicit in our evolving legal system. In addition no history would be complete without recognition of the support and advice, given freely by the community of Law Librarians. However, regardless of what form or shape the future of Murdoch Law Library takes in the emerging digital world, one thing will remain constant for whoever may staff it: the initial desire of its founders to provide a "good" law library.

MURDOCH LAW SCHOOL

THE SEARCH FOR EXCELLENCE



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Murdoch Law School: The search for excellence

Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of Murdoch Law School

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